

Tracks

Fall 2001 • Free to Hunters

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*Cover photo courtesy of the
National Wild Turkey Federation.*



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California's 2001/2002 Upland Game Seasons

Although limited rainfall in some portions of California can be expected to result in lower upland game populations, the central coast, south coast, and Colorado River regions received above average rainfall, which may result in improved hunting possibilities.

Abundant, well-timed rainfall in the Colorado River Region (Imperial Valley, Twentynine Palms, east to Needles and the river) enhanced desert upland game habitat by creating abundant water sources,

green feed, and cover. These conditions favor improved reproduction of Gambel's quail and cottontail rabbits. The central and south coast regions fared even better, giving upland game hunters good prospects.

Following is a summary of the 2001/2002 hunting seasons and bag limits. Complete regulations can be found on the DFG web site at www.dfg.ca.gov.

Good luck this hunting season!

Ring-necked Pheasant

General Season: Nov. 10 - Dec. 9, 2001

Bag Limit: Two males per day for opening weekend; three males per day beginning on the third day

Possession Limit: double the daily bag limit

Shoot Times: 8:00 a.m., to sunset



File photo.



Photo by Robert Waldron.

Wild Turkey

Fall

Season: Nov. 10 - 25, 2001

Bag Limits: One turkey (can be either sex)

Possession Limit: One per season

Shoot Times: ½ hour before sunrise, to sunset

Spring

Season: Mar. 30 - May 5, 2002

Bag Limit: One bearded turkey per day

Possession Limit: Three per season

Shoot Times: ½ hour before sunrise, to 4:00 p.m.

Dove

General Season: Sept. 1-15 & Nov. 10-Dec. 23, 2001

Bag Limit: 10 per day in any combination of mourning, white-winged and spotted doves. White-winged doves may only be taken in Imperial, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties.

Possession Limit: double the daily bag limit

Shoot Times: ½ hour before sunrise, to sunset



Photo by Cap van Balgooy.

Mail Bag Letters to the Editor

Thanks to those of you who took the time to send us your feedback on *Tracks*. As a "fledgling" publication, so to speak, the newly-expanded magazine continues to be shaped by your comments about content.

Cooking Clarification

The "Pro Tips" section on page 27 (*Tracks* Summer 2001) mentioned cooking pork to a minimal internal temperature of 145° F to ensure safe consumption. The temperature required in state law is 155° and the *Control of Communicable Disease Manual* recommends 160° F. I believe it is something that should be clarified. Overall, I really enjoyed this publication—especially this one. Keep up the good work.

Brian C. Hodge

Editor's Note:

We should have clarified that the cooking temperature recommended by Chef Kirk Williams must be maintained for a minimum of three minutes to ensure safe consumption. According to "Serving Safe Food: A Practical Approach to Food Safety," the certification coursebook used by National Restaurant Association's ServSafe program, pork and game meat should be cooked to a minimum temperature of either: 155° F for 15 seconds; 150° F for one minute; or 145° F

for three minutes. It goes on to recommend that field-dressed game be cooked at 165° F for at least 15 seconds. Thanks for bringing this issue to our attention.

Kudos

Thank you for a very good publication. The contents are extremely relevant to our hunting privilege in California. Keep up the good work!

John E. Horton
Fresno

The Summer 2001 issue of *Tracks* was outstanding. In particular, I enjoyed the article about the deer herd forecasting. Please extend to your staff my respect and sincere appreciation. Respectfully,

J. Fred Oliver
La Jolla

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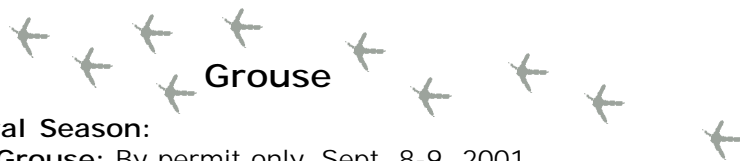
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2001/2002 Hunting Seasons



Grouse

General Season:

Sage Grouse: By permit only, Sept. 8-9, 2001

Blue Grouse, Ruffed Grouse: Sept. 8-Oct. 8 2001

Bag Limit: Sage Grouse, East Lassen and Central Lassen zones: Two per day, two per season.

Sage Grouse, North Mono and South Mono and Inyo zones: One per day, one per season.

Blue and Ruffed Grouse: Two per day; can be one of each, or two of one species.

Possession Limit: Double the daily bag limit for blue and ruffed grouse; for sage grouse the possession limit is the same as the bag limit.

Shoot Times: ½ hour before sunrise, to sunset.



File photo.

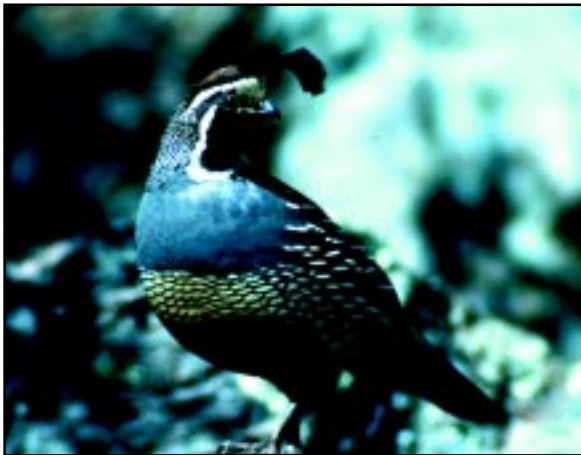


Photo by Wm. E. Grenfell.



Quail

Seasons*:

Archery: Aug. 18 - Sept. 7, 2001

Early Mountain Quail: Sept. 8 - Oct. 19, 2001

General Quail: Oct. 20, 2001 - Jan. 27, 2002

Early Coastal: Sept. 29, 2001 - Jan. 27, 2002

Balance of State: Oct. 20, 2001 - Jan. 27, 2002

Bag Limit: Ten quail, in any combination of species, per day

Possession Limit: Double the daily bag limit

Shoot Times: ½ hour before sunrise, to sunset

*See regulation booklet for descriptions of hunt zones.

Rabbits & Hares

General Season:

Brush, Cottontail, Pigmy Rabbit; Snowshoe Hare:

Jul. 1, 2001 - Jan. 27, 2002

Jack Rabbit: open all year

Bag Limit: five per day, but no limit for jack rabbit

Possession Limit: double the daily bag limit

Shoot Times: ½ hour before sunrise, to ½ hour after sunset



File photo.



Photo by Wm. E. Grenfell.



Band-tailed Pigeon

General Season:

Northern Zone: Sept. 15-23, 2001

Southern Zone: Dec. 15-23, 2001

Bag Limit: two per day

Possession Limit: double the daily bag limit

Shoot Times: ½ hour before sunrise, to sunset

2001/2002 Hunting Seasons



File photo.

Common Snipe

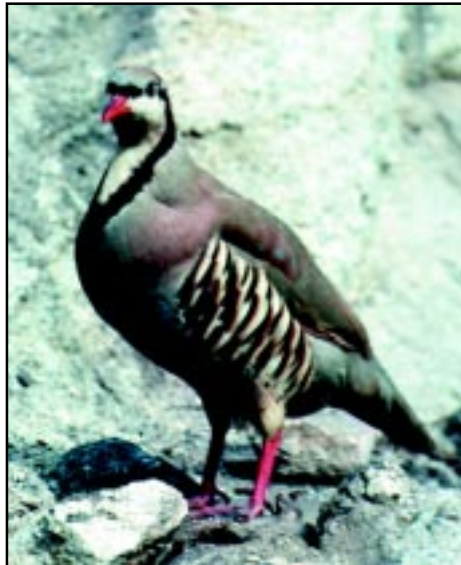
General Season: Oct. 20, 2001 - Feb. 3, 2002
Bag Limit: eight per day
Possession Limit: double the daily bag limit
Shoot Times: ½ hour before sunrise, to sunset

American Crow

General Season: Dec. 1, 2001 - Apr. 3, 2002
Bag Limit: 24 per day
Possession Limit: double the daily bag limit
Shoot Times: ½ hour before sunrise, to sunset



Photo by Wm. E. Grenfell.



File photo.

Chukar

General Season: Oct. 20, 2001-Jan. 27, 2002
Bag Limit: six per day
Possession Limit: double the day bag limit
Shoot Times: ½ hour before sunrise, to sunset

White-tailed Ptarmigan

General Season: Sept. 8-16, 2001
Bag Limit: two per day
Possession Limit: two per season
Shoot Times: ½ hour before sunrise, to sunset



Photo by Jesse Garcia.

From Dollars To Doves

Game Bird Stamp Funds Dove Habitat Improvement

by Karen R. Fothergill



Developed ponds provide watering sties in close proximity to food plots at Spenceville Wildlife Area. Photo by Karen Fothergill.

bound doves, but also benefit other game and non-game species such as quail and wild turkey, and many types of song-birds and rodents.

For more information on public lands open to dove hunting refer to the DFG publication *California Hunting and Other Public Uses on State and Federal Areas*, available at DFG offices statewide and on the DFG web site at <http://www.dfg.ca.gov>.

Karen R. Fothergill is a DFG wildlife biologist specializing in upland game birds, and coordinator of the Game Bird Heritage Program which utilizes game bird stamp funds to expand upland game hunting opportunities.

Did you know that out of 285,655 licensed hunters in 1999, almost 69 percent hunted upland game birds? Of those, approximately 62 percent hunted doves. With these numbers in mind, more of the dollars generated through the sale of the Upland Game Bird Stamp are being seeded in upland projects that provide habitat for doves. Recently, wildlife area habitat crews have implemented projects on Gray Lodge, Feather River and Spenceville wildlife areas.

Spenceville Wildlife Area, located 20 miles east of Marysville, is well known for quality turkey hunting, but what about the dove hunting? For the last two years, the Department of Fish and Game staff has been working hard enhancing habitat that will attract more doves. Ninety eight acres of cereal crops were planted in nine locations in the

fall of 1999, and 107 acres of safflower and sunflower in eight locations were planted in the spring of 2000. The average bag on opening day was eight, and there was good hunting for the following two to three days.

Spring crops of safflower and sunflower create the perfect dove magnet. Doves are so heavily attracted to these plantings that some hunters call the seeds of these flowers "dove candy". The seeds of safflower and sunflowers contain high levels of rich oil and proteins that these birds need for their migration south. Although these food crops benefit the hunter by attracting doves, they also provide a valuable foraging area before and after the legal dove hunting season.

The comprehensive fall and spring plantings at Spenceville and other wildlife areas provide many foraging stops for south-



Safflower produces seeds that are a favored dove food. Photo by Karen R. Fothergill.

Learning The Secrets of Sage Grouse

by Frank Hall

Sage grouse were once found throughout the Great Basin. Today, California's populations are mainly limited to Modoc, Lassen, Mono and Inyo Counties. The population is estimated at between 4,000 and 6,000, and is flourishing on a local basis. Since 1986, the Department has substantially increased its monitoring of sage grouse distribution, habitat requirements and populations.

Sage grouse have caught a lot of attention throughout the west in the last few years because they are considered by some to be an "umbrella" species for many other less spectacular species that live in shrub-steppe habitat—Brewer's sparrows, sage thrashers and pygmy rabbits to name a few. Two populations of sage grouse (in Washington and Colorado) have recently been petitioned for listing as endangered species. Let's focus on the biology, not the politics, of this special upland game bird.

One of the many special characteristics of sage grouse is that they are a "lek" forming species. So what in the world is a "lek"? Most simply, a lek is a place where members of a population gather to display and mate. Sage grouse lek sites are openings within larger areas of shrubs, primarily big sagebrush, where visibility between birds is high. The elaborate display activity and mate selection process is dependant upon the birds being able to see each other. Males gather on these sites (also called "strutting grounds") to display and attract females beginning in early March. Leks are usually about two to 20 acres in size and contain as many as 30 to 50 males. A few leks in eastern Lassen County peak at more than 100 males in most years.



Male sage grouse on a "lek" or strutting site. Photo by Marybeth Temples.

Leks are in the same places from year to year and are crucial for reproduction. If a lek site is lost to development it's not likely to "move" to a more suitable site. In general, once a lek is lost the local population cannot reproduce and will soon collapse.

In 1997, Sierra Pacific Power Company began constructing a 365 kv electrical power transmission line through eastern Modoc and Lassen counties to enhance power availability in Reno, Nevada. Sage grouse were among the species that could have been affected by its construction. One of the first things we looked at was the response of sage grouse leks to existing overhead lines (power and telephone) near leks. Since we had lek counts (number of males attending leks each season) since the 1950s, it seemed reasonable to compare the trend of long term counts with the distance to existing overhead lines. Those leks with overhead lines within one mile had become unused; those leks with lines within three to six miles largely remained unchanged or declined slightly.

Most leks over about 12 miles from existing lines remained unchanged or actually increased. There was little direct evidence of mortality along lines or displacement of populations.

How could an overhead line have had an effect on the numbers of sage grouse at leks? While we knew that bird colli-

sions with lines were a real possibility, most of the data pointed towards something else that affected grouse numbers at leks near transmission lines. Modern overhead lines are becoming more and more "raptor friendly" to prevent electrocution of hawks, falcons, eagles and ravens that perch (or build nests) on towers. The likely effects for sage grouse were that towers enhanced the ability or efficiency of these predators. For example, we know from studies elsewhere that young golden eagles hunt more efficiently from a perch than they do while soaring.

There are two additional possibilities: one is that ravens started to nest on towers in areas where no nesting was possible before. Ravens are a sage grouse nest predator which nest on rocks or structures, not on the ground in open sagebrush valleys. The second is that sage grouse on leks might view the towers as predator perch sites and react by abandoning leks. A combination of all three effects might be working.



There is a dramatic difference in the appearance of a displaying male sage grouse, below, and one that is "at rest" (left). Photo at left by John C. Muegge; photo below by



Bonnie R. Harrigan.
unusual and may relate to the habitat quality near lek sites.

We began a radio telemetry project within the Lassen County sage grouse population in 1998 to learn habitat selection, residency or migration patterns and habitat enhancement potential to offset losses from the SPP line. This project was initially funded by the power company as a mitigation measure. Game Bird Heritage Program funds, from the sale of upland game bird hunting stamps, have helped to fund this ongoing project beginning in 2000. SPP also rerouted portions of the line and fitted towers near leks with "perch deflectors" designed to reduce raptor use. Additional funds were also made available for purchase of off-site lands for habitat enhancement.

DFG biologists captured 65 females between 1998 and 2000. Each was fitted with a 19 gram radio transmitter and a numbered leg band. The transmitters were about the size and weight of three 25 cent pieces stuck together. The transmitters allow us to locate birds and correlate their habitat selection to their nesting success. Here are some of the most interesting findings:

- Nest success averaged about 40 percent which is lower than desirable but not far below other sage grouse studies in other states.
- Nesting sage grouse selected tall shrub sites over low sagebrush sites.
- Successful nesting sites were almost twice as far from leks as the unsuccessful sites. This is

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- There were statistically significant differences in types of shrubs used by successful and unsuccessful nesters.
 - Successfully nesting sage grouse selected sites with more rock cover and higher shrubs than unsuccessful nesters.
 - A diversity of shrub species (in addition to tall sagebrush) was desirable for nest success.
- The study results indicate that we need to improve the quality and availability of big sagebrush to improve nesting success.

The study has also answered questions about whether Lassen County sage grouse are resident or migratory. Unlike most sage grouse populations, which are usually characterized as one or the other, Lassen County sage grouse are both.

A portion are resident near their "home" leks. These grouse nest and spend the summer and winter within four to six miles of leks.

A second group are one-stage migrants that usually nest near leks (three to five miles), move up to 16 miles for brood rearing, then move back to spend the

winter near their lek.

The most interesting are two-stage migrants that nest up to 10 miles from leks then move 40 or more miles to the northwest and to higher elevation sites to rear broods and spend the summer. In early fall they migrate 40-50 miles southeast into Nevada. They winter on high benches and canyon rims southwest of Gerlach, Nevada. Some of the resident and one-stage migrant grouse also winter in this

area.

These complex movement patterns seem to have built-in rules. Residents stay resident and migrants migrate with consistency. For those females surviving over many years, none changed her specific pattern. There was no year to year deviation; each hen used the same lek site, summer and winter range each year, each season. (Some transmitters have been working on the same grouse for more than three years).

Some of the spring to summer movements are remarkably fast as well as long. A sage grouse chick can fly when it's less than ten days old and smaller than a tennis ball. Some females moved their chicks more than 40 miles in less than a week. They may walk or fly for only short distances but they move like their lives depend on it. They probably do.

It might be a while before someone determines if these habitat use patterns are learned by young female sage grouse from their mothers or whether DNA is even more remarkable than we thought.

Frank Hall is an Associate Wildlife Biologist assigned to the DFG's Northern California/North Coast Region. He has been working on wildlife and wildlife habitat issues.

Something To Crow About For California Pheasants (and Hunters)

by Chet Hart

A groundbreaking study underway on the DFG's Grizzly Island Wildlife Area is yielding important clues about how to manage one of the state's most popular game birds. The study is headed by Chet Hart, a retired DFG biologist who has studied pheasants for more than 50 years.

The widespread and abundant pheasant populations once found in California, especially the Central Valley, are essentially gone. They have been the victims of technological and economic forces that have eliminated or degraded habitat in the agricultural pheasant range.

Supply and demand on world commodity markets now largely dictate what crops are grown. Modern farming responds quickly to these economic forces, and cannot be expected to do otherwise. In general, the status of pheasant populations in most of the U.S. is now largely a product of such market forces.

Is there an alternative to simply relying on a "free ride" from agriculture? Yes, and there is hope!

Continued observation of the overall pheasant picture in California has revealed that, within some areas, pheasants are as abundant as ever. In many cases these thriving pheasant populations are "accidents of nature," essentially without conscious management for pheasants.

Recognition of these circumstances has led some wildlife managers to conclude:

- Small acreages can produce significant populations of pheasants under the right circumstances;



Rooster ring-necked pheasant in his crowing territory at Grizzly Island Wildlife Area. Photo by Chet Hart.

- It may be possible to evaluate and duplicate these "accidents of nature" that have produced localized by dense pheasant populations;

- Such intensive management of limited areas has the potential to significantly increase pheasant numbers on many of the DFG wildlife areas, other publicly owned areas, and on private lands such as duck clubs.

The potential here is greater than many people may expect. For example, in the Central Valley alone, the DFG currently owns and manages seven major wildlife areas encompassing 16,200 acres of uplands. Another 55,000 upland acres are privately owned and managed as duck clubs, many less productive of pheasants than members and owners desire.

The desire to produce more pheasants is one thing; the issue of "know how" is a bit more complicated. However, over the last 15 years much has been accomplished to advance or confirm what we know about pheasant management here, and what we can learn from other states and countries.

Generally, information from other states has not been very helpful. California conditions are sufficiently unique, particularly with regard to weather, that most pheasant behavioral or management information from other regions has limited application here.

Interestingly, the most useful information and advice is coming from European biologists and wildlife managers. Many large rural estates in Europe practice

intensive management for pheasants, both for social and commercial purposes, with research programs supporting these efforts. Dr. Peter Robertson, formerly a pheasant research biologist in Britain, has been most helpful in providing information on management practices and results of pheasant research conducted there.

Applying this information to DFG wildlife areas represents an expansion in focus. For many years, most of these wildlife areas were focused almost entirely on wetlands development and management. The result has been a significant increase in waterfowl and shorebird production, and the ability to support larger wintering populations of such migratory species.

However, management of the uplands on these areas generally has not followed a similar course. With limited exceptions, the results evidently have not been comparable in fostering upland species of wildlife. For example:

- On the Gray Lodge Wildlife Area in the Sacramento Valley, long the premier public hunting area in the state for pheasants, the checked bag of ring-necked roosters in 1983 was 2752. Last year (2000), it was 797.

- On Grizzly Island Wildlife Area in Suisun Marsh of the western Delta, which was selected for initially evaluating the intensive pheasant management concept, the pheasant bag peaked in 1986 with 1208 roosters, after being over 1000 for the previous three years. Last hunting season it was 362.

An organized effort began in the early 1990s to determine why the wildlife areas were not more productive for pheasants. A three year radiotelemetry study at the

Mendota Wildlife Area in the San Joaquin Valley was the first major study of this type conducted on California pheasants (as yet unpublished). Several key findings came from the study, including:

- Most hens were highly sedentary, with non-exclusive spring ranges averaging only about 40 acres. One hen apparently never left an area of 12 acres, including nesting and successfully rearing a brood. The smaller ranges were highly diversified, including wet or moist conditions.

- Low pheasant numbers evidently were due primarily to very low survival of young chicks.

- The high chick mortality was believed to result mainly from lack of insects (arthropods and closely related invertebrates), essential food for chick survival and development.

- Low insect numbers evidently were due to poor quality brood cover and adequate moisture, which are essential to good arthropod production.

These findings reinforced that most of California naturally is marginal pheasant range – there typically is insufficient rainfall and it usually comes at the wrong time. The Mendota area averages about seven inches of precipitation, with very little after March. Most of the chick hatch occurs about two months



Left: Rooster pheasant, fitted with transmitter, ready for release.

Below: Vehicle-mounted antenna and observation tower allow more accurately determined locations of monitored pheasants.

Photos by Chet Hart.





Managed pheasant habitat at Grizzly Island Wildlife Area. Photo by Chet Hart.

continued from page 11

later, in late May and early June, when conditions usually have become too dry. Thus, late, wet springs or timely irrigations are essential for good chick survival to bolster pheasant numbers.

The Mendota study findings, together with related field observations and pertinent information from the previously mentioned British sources, have led to a new management concept being formulated here in California. It entails selecting relatively small sites (80-160 acres) for focused management, within which all pheasant habitat requirements are provided if they aren't already there or immediately nearby. A key part of this is having adequate nesting cover in close proximity to, or interspersed with, managed brood cover of high quality that is kept moist and productive by irrigation or other water manipulation. Then, instead of the breeding population being unproductively scattered over a wide area where good chick survival is unlikely, especially during dry springs, measures are taken to concentrate it in the managed area. There the enhanced brood cover should increase chick survival and resulting juvenile recruitment to

the population.

The somewhat unique breeding characteristics of ringnecks should make this latter step more feasible than with many species. Pheasants are polygamous, with the roosters in early spring selecting exclusive crowing territories to which they attract hens for their harems, with the hens then nesting nearby. For their crowing territories, roosters seek out places where an open display area adjoins a taller, denser cover edge. A key part of the cover management here is to develop attractive crowing territory sites centered within the managed area. As Dr. Robertson advised, "Concentrate on the roosters and the hens will take care of themselves."

Field testing of this management concept began on Grizzly Island Wildlife Area last year as a one year pilot project. It is anticipated that study "bugs" will be worked out in time to facilitate evaluation of areas under the new management after they are more completely developed later this year. Primarily, the evaluation study will compare pheasant produc-

tion from areas developed and managed in accordance with the new concept with that of traditionally managed or unmanaged comparison areas. Radiotelemetry is being used as the main study tool. Last January, radio transmitters were attached to 20 roosters and 49 hens in or near the study areas. The birds are being tracked to follow their habitat selection and use, including where and how far roosters move to establish crowing territories, and where hens nest and rear their broods. Chick survival will be correlated to the type and condition of brood cover utilized.

The study, as well as much of the habitat development work, is being supported by the Game Bird Heritage Program, from the proceeds of upland game stamp sales.

Perhaps it should be added that the benefits of such upland habitat management are not one-dimensional. Separate but related studies in the San Joaquin Valley have demonstrated that the more diversified habitat resulting from such management was also significantly more productive for grassland songbirds, with higher nesting and fledging rates, as well as for mourning doves and waterfowl.

Chet Hart is a retired DFG biologist and administrator with more than 50 years of experience with pheasant research and land use issues.

Special Upland Hunting Opportunities

For the coming upland game seasons, the DFG plans more than 200 special hunting opportunities in about 90 different locations, with quotas of up to 9,000 participants. The events will allow juniors, women and families to hunt for quail, wild turkey, dove and pheasant. A list of all these hunts, and how to apply, will be available on the DFG web site at <http://www.dfg.ca.gov> by the end of July.

Ask a biologist

Aging Turkeys; Distinguishing Wild From Pen-Reared Pheasants

Q. Can you age a wild turkey based on its trophy characteristics?

DFG wild turkey biologist Scott Gardner replies:

A Yes and no. Hunters can easily distinguish a gobbler (adult male) from a jake (juvenile male) in the field based on beard length, but after two years it can be difficult to determine the age of a turkey based on its beard and spur lengths.

Biologists tend to not care how old a turkey is, but essentially whether it is an adult or a juvenile. There is a surefire method for distinguishing between adults and juveniles using the last two primary flight feathers. Juvenile birds do not molt the outer two primary flight feathers in their first year, so these feathers will be older, smaller, and less developed than those of adult birds. By the time the bird reaches maturity, just over one year of age, it will molt and the two pointed feathers will be replaced by larger, more rounded ones.

It is not possible to determine the exact age of an adult turkey by examining its beard and spur length. Variables such as subspe-

cies, environmental conditions, and possibly even nutrition can alter the length of both the beard and the spur; however, there are some general guidelines which can be used to provide fairly reliable estimates.

The "beard" is actually composed of specialized feathers, not hair (which is present only in mammals). The beard does continue to grow in length much like hair though, and to a point, the longer the beard the older the bird. Jakes may have beards that vary anywhere from less than one inch to about four inches, depending on when the bird was hatched in the previous year. By their second year, gobblers may have a beard as long as eight to ten inches. By age three, the beard will likely reach its maximum length. Beards tend not to grow much longer than about 10 inches, though, simply because the end is worn off on the ground.

Spur length can also be used to estimate a bird's age although, like beards, spurs reach maximum development by about three years, and can be close to full size in two years. A jake will have spurs up to about three-quarters of an inch at one year of age, and spurs rarely grow in excess of about 1.25 inches.

"Guesstimating" A Turkey's Age:

Beard Length:

0" - 4"	1 year or younger
4" - 5"	1 year
8" - 10"	2 years
10" +	3 years or older

Spur Length:

0" - 1/2"	1 year or a jake
1/2" - 7/8"	2 years
7/8" - 1"	3 years
1" +	4 years or older

Source: *The Book of the Wild Turkey*, Williams, 1981

How Long Can Birds Live?

Below is a list of the longest-lived upland birds according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's data on recovered bird bands.

Common Name	Age: Years-Months
Blue Grouse	11-10
Ruffed Grouse	8-06
Wild Turkey	12-06
Band-tailed Pigeon	18-06
Spotted Dove	7-08
Mourning Dove	31-04
White-winged Dove	21-09
California Quail	6-11
American Crow	14-07
Common Snipe	9-03

Compiled by Victoria Hassid.

Q. Is there any way to tell the difference between a wild pheasant and a captive-raised one?

A. There is a simple way to tell the difference between wild and "planted" pheasants. To prevent pheasants from pecking each other while in captivity, many game breeders use blinders which prevent the birds from seeing what's directly in front of them. The blinders are inserted through the bird's nose. Although painless, the procedure greatly enlarges the hole. If you can see daylight through the pheasant's nose, it was most likely bred in captivity.



Blinders used to protect captive-raised pheasants leave evidence that help distinguish the birds from their wild counterparts. Photos by Robert Waldron.

Field Dressing Techniques

By Kirk Williams, CEC, CCE

If you've ever "dry plucked" a pheasant, you know how long and tedious the plucking process can be.

Chef Kirk Williams offers the following tips that will make the cleaning process quick and easy, and will allow cooks to make use of the entire bird.

Photos by Robert Waldron.



1. Blanching—Bring a large pot of water to a boil. While holding the bird by its legs, press down with tongs or a spoon to completely submerge it. Allow to blanch for one to two minutes, depending on the size. Test by pulling on a wing or tail feather. When properly blanched, feathers will remove easily and the skin will maintain its integrity during plucking.



2. Plucking—Experience teaches that the fewer feathers plucked at one time, the less chance of tearing the skin. Pluck in the direction of feather growth for the best results.



3. Feather Scorching—Using a propane torch or gas burner, scorch the remaining down or pin feathers quickly and wipe off with a clean towel.



4. Head, Wing and Feet Removal—Using a sharp knife, remove the head one inch above the collarbone. Remove the wings at the first or second joint and the feet at the ankles.



5. Evisceration—Make a shallow one inch incision just above the vent. Cutting too deep may puncture the entrails. Use your finger to enlarge the whole if necessary. Using your index finger, dislodge the entrails inside the cavity by running it between the membrane and entrails.



6. Gutting—Insert a finger between the neck and collarbone. Again run the finger against the cavity, this time releasing the lungs, esophagus, and craw. Cut the esophagus with scissors if necessary. Remove the innards from the tail end of the vent in one cluster. Sever the intestines last.



7. Splitting—For grilling, remove the tail. Using a sharp knife, split the backbone directly down the center. Open to expose the inside and cut again through the "keel bone" (breast bone). Rinse well. Cook as desired.





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Pro Tips

Smaller game birds are always roasted at higher temperatures, like 425° F to achieve browning, while larger birds such as turkeys are roasted at lower temperatures like 300° F to prevent burning and excessive moisture loss.

The gelatinous material found at the breastbone of a wild turkey is called the sponge. It is merely fat and may be removed prior to cooking.

Young pheasants often lack a fully developed taste profile and can benefit greatly from a few days of refrigerated aging after cleaning and prior to cooking.

Dutch oven cooking is a perfect solution to campsite preparations where braising or pot-roasting is required.

In order to preserve maximum freshness and shelf-life, and to reduce the growth of bacteria, all upland game birds should be cleaned and refrigerated within hours of harvesting. If cleaning must be postponed, refrigerate immediately and clean as soon as possible.

Salmonella bacteria, common in domestic poultry, can also be harbored by wild game birds. To kill salmonella—and other bacteria that may be harmful to humans—cook game birds to an internal temperature of 165° F at the thickest point.

The Final Reward

by Chef Kirk Williams, CEC, CCE

Marinated Grilled Mountain Quail With Fresno Herbs

This simple method of preparation is perfect for weekend hunting trips and excellent for many other types of small game birds such as dove, chukar, pigeon, snipe, etc. The number of birds needed to serve four persons is dependant upon the size of the birds and the appetite of your guests. Serves four.

8	each	Quail, cleaned and split lengthwise
¼	cup	Olive Oil
4	cloves	Garlic, minced
1	each	Lemon, juiced
1	Tbsp.	Fresh Thyme, minced
2	Tbsp.	Fresh Sage, minced
1	Tbsp.	Fresh Rosemary
1	Tbsp.	Dijon Mustard
½	cup	Dry White Wine
2	tsp.	Salt
1	tsp.	Black Pepper, freshly ground

Baste and grill over hot coals. Note: The birds may be basted with the marinade for the first several minutes if desired, after which, basting with the marinade should be avoided. This is to prevent possible contamination from the previously marinated meat.

Pheasant Chasseur

This recipe is based on a classic French dish originally prepared with chicken. However, braising is perfect for pheasant, which is often very lean. I think you'll agree when you taste this, it's a great warmer-upper after a cold hunt. It's even better when served with garlic or rosemary mashed potatoes. Serves four.

1	each	Pheasant, cleaned and disjointed
		Salt and freshly ground black pepper
1/3	cup	Olive Oil
¼	cup	Onion, medium diced
1	clove	Garlic, minced
6	oz.	Mushrooms, sliced
4	oz.	Dry White Wine
1	cup	Fresh Tomatoes, peeled, seeded and medium diced
6	oz.	Demi Glaze (available in dry packets at most stores)
2	each	Bay Leaves
2	Tbsp.	Fresh Basil, chopped
2	Tbsp.	Fresh Oregano, chopped

Season the pheasant with salt and pepper. Heat the oil in a braising (or sauté pan with a lid) and add the pheasant pieces. Sauté until browned on all sides. Remove and reserve the pheasant. Add the onion and sauté until tender. Add the garlic and mushrooms. Sauté two minutes and add the wine. Reduce by half its volume and add the tomatoes, demi glaze and bay leaves. Bring to a boil and add the pheasant. Cover and simmer on low for 45 minutes. Stir in the herbs and adjust the seasonings.

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